A WOMAN'S ENCHANTMENT

By William Le Queux

(Continued.)

"Most men are better off without friends," I declared.

"You're quite right, Phil," he said. "I wish I could struggle on without them; but, somehow, I pick up so many."

"Because of your power to attract them. The man who has no friends usually grows rich."

"You mean miserly skunks—eh? I know the type."

"Yes, the really rich man has few friends. He's clever enough not to make any."

"Yes. But that requires more tact than I possess. My forte is cheek, I believe. I pride myself that if occasion require it I can tell a lie perfectly. Indeed, in my profession I've brought lying to a fine art."

"In that I quite believe you, my dear Granny!" I laughed. "You're a better liar even than an Old Bailey lawyer."

"When necessity dictates."

Granville Gough was surely a man of complex nature. A light-hearted, careless devil-may-care adventurer, without fixed habitation, but with hosts of friends, he lived in all the capitals of Europe by turn, a few days here, a few days there, until he was just as much at home in the Puerta del Sol, in Madrid, as in the Corso, in Rome, the Nevski, in Petersburg, or our own familiar Strand. His friends, too, were of every station, from princes and ministers of state, whom he would invite to dinner, down to those ragged night birds, the scum of a continental city, who knew him to be a "crook," and were ever ready to furnish him with information or render him service.

I, perhaps, was the only man who knew Granny Gough intimately. Many a man and many a woman who reads these lines will have met in London and on the Continent—under a different name, of course—always exquisitely dressed, always affable, and always affluent, for never once within my experience has he ever allowed the world to believe him anything but prosperous. It was one of the tenets of his religion. "Put on a bold front and order a good dinner, even though you have to pawn your portmanteau afterward," he used to say.

When Granny Gough put his wits together there was not a cleverer man on the whole face of Europe. I have known him to get the best of the most expert diplomat, and to convince a minister of state against his will. When he intended to carry his point he would fix his opponent with his big clear blue eyes with a look of intensity which seemed somehow to hypnotize and fascinate. How it was I cannot tell. In this chronicle of strange events I am simply setting down what actually occurred. I am not seeking the reason of my friend's marvelous and amazing power over his fellow-men; but I am relating a curiously romantic and extraordinary chain of facts of which I myself have been witness in this past year or so of my own cosmopolitan life.

I myself have been a constant and homeless wanderer on the continent, like Gough, but in a different sphere. Circumstances, curious in themselves, had drawn us closely together, and now, at the period of which I am writing, I found that our lives had become, almost before I was aware of it, closely associated.

He was my friend. Men might call him an adventurer. Those whom he had befriended—and they were many—might hold up their hands in pious horror that they had ever associated with an outsider. For that I cared nothing.

I knew the true heart of the big-handed, big-faced, clean-shaven man with the fair curly hair, who always reminded me of an overgrown boy. That heart which had sympathized with the starving woman and her child; that heart that loved little Myra Stapleton so dearly, which delighted in Nietzsche's philosophy, and was now broken because of the dastardly treachery of a man whom he had foolishly treated as his friend.

Again I looked at him, as he smoked on in thoughtful silence.

CHAPTER VIII.

The Perfect Stranger.

Next morning I received some rather disconcerting news.

A letter informed me that a favorite aunt of mine—from whom I had considerable expectations, by the way—was lying seriously ill at a nursing home at Worthing. Therefore I drove at once to Victoria and took the next train down.

Though a good many people were traveling, I managed to find an empty first-class smoker, but scarcely had I settled myself when another man, dark-bearded, middle-aged, well-dressed, and without luggage like myself, entered and seated himself in the opposite corner.

Ere the train moved off he made a casual remark to me, and we began to chat. He seemed a pleasant fellow, and struck me as a city man making a flying visit to his wife and family at the seaside, as is so often the case.

We had smoked and chatted pleasantly for half an hour or so when the topic of conversation turned upon traveling. I mentioned that I traveled a good deal on the continent, when he exclaimed, with a sigh.

"Ah, yes; and so do I."

I then put him down as a commercial traveler, for he spoke of the various capitals of Europe with intimate knowledge.

"My life is spent in almost constant travel," he went on. "But, after all, there's no place like England."

I agreed with him heartily. Though a cosmopolitan, I love my own country, notwithstanding its mud and fogs.

Then we chatted all the way down to Worthing, where we parted. But before doing so I exchanged cards with my pleasant companion, whose name I discovered was "Mr. Charles Grinfield."

I lunched at Warne's, spent the afternoon at my aunt's bedside and at 6:33 caught the express to Victoria.

An agreeable surprise awaited me when I found my fellow-traveler of the morning lounging up and down the platform awaiting the train.

"Hulloa!" he cried pleasantly. "I wondered if you might be returning by my train."

So together we entered an empty comparment and continued our chat.

There was something about the man which struck me as indescribably mysterious. Why, I cannot tell. Somehow he seemed unduly inquisitive regarding my recent movements. That he was a detective was, of course, out of the question. Besides, why should the police keep observation upon myself? I had committed no crime.

So I dismissed such weird thoughts from my mind.

Perhaps it was that, owing to my cosmopolitan existence, I had become distrustful of every stranger. Indeed, I never traveled without a revolver in my pocket, a habit acquired abroad, and one which had on many occasions secured for me a peaceful night. Alone, in a strange and lonely house, in a strange land, it is really remarkable what security one feels with a handy six-shooters under one's pillow.

Now, I confess that before we got to Croydon I entertained some shrewd suspicion of my engaging fellow-traveler who had given his name as Grinfield. He had been a little too ready to give me his card, and I always distrust that action. Quickly made friendships have usually some ulterior motive.

And yet, as he sat back in the corner, enjoying his excellent cigar, there was nothing suspicious about him. Nevertheless, why had he waited in Worthing to travel back with me? Once in the afternoon I had caught sight of him in the town, but he had instantly disappeared. Had he been watching my movements?

Some of his remarks were certainly inquiries regarding myself. And this inquisitiveness I naturally resented.

This he apparently noticed, for while we were waiting in Croydon station he suddenly looked me straight in the face and said:

"Mr. Ralston, I see that you are just a little annoyed with me for prying into your affairs," and his bearded face relaxed into a smile.

"Well," I answered, "I confess I don't quite follow your object in asking certain of the questions you have asked. I tell you frankly I consider it a bit of impertinence. How can my private affairs concern you—a perfect stranger?"

"They concern me greatly," was his prompt response. "I admit that I have been impertinent, and for that I apologize and ask your forgiveness. You are no doubt annoyed—I should be if I were in your place."

"You followed me down to Worthing. Admit that?"

"Certainly. I admit that. I came down with you in order to have a chat."

"Then I will leave you and get into another carriage," I said, rising in anger.

"No. Remain here. We shall be in Victoria in a few minutes," he urged. "I want to speak to you in strictest confidence. If you answer my questions truthfully it will be distinctly to your advantage."

I looked him straight in the face in wonder. What could the stranger mean?

At that moment the train moved slowly off; therefore I could only resume my seat.

"Now, let us be frank, Mr. Ralston," said the stranger, his dark eyes fixed upon mine. "You are a cosmopolitan, and we have met on many previous occasions, though we have never spoken. Philip Ralston is known in all the capitals—so am I, but under a different name to that I gave up this morning."

"Then you are masquerading!" I cried resentfully.

"Of necessity. I could not exhibit my hand at once to you."

"And what's in your hand, pray?"

"The winning cards—if you'll help me to play them."

"I don't follow you."

He laughed. "Of course you don't! But I will try to explain if you will reply to one or two simple questions."

"Well?"

"You were in Bucharest quite recenty?"

"I was."

"And you were at the Hotel Boulevard with a certain Granville Gough?"

"I was. Why?"

"Mr. Gough is a friend of yours?"

"I have known him a good many years."

"Rather—er—well, rather an undesirable acquaintance—shall we say?"

"No," I replied. "He is my friend."

The stranger, who had given me a false name, smiled rather sarcastically.

"Surely a rather dangerous friend, Mr. Ralston? Permit me to say so."

"No, I do not, permit you to say anything against a man who is my friend," I exclaimed quickly.

"Not if that friendship constitutes a danger to yourself?"

"To myself!" I cried. "What danger need I fear?"

"Well, one hardly likes to be known as the friend or accomplice of an adventurer."

"I choose my friends, and take the risk," was my response.

He shrugged his shoulders and tossed the end of his cigar out of the window.

"Very well, my dear sir, I will say no more," he exclaimed. "I approached you as a friend——"

"And an enemy of Gough," I interrupted.

(To be Continued.)

LIVE STOCK MARKET.

New York, Aug. 26.—Common to good native steers sold at $4.85 @ $6.35 per 100 lbs.; oxen and stags at $3.75 @ $4.65; bulls at $3 @ $4; cows at $1.40 @ $4.25. Dressed beef 8½c @ 10½c.

Common to choice veals sold at $6.50 @ $10 per 100 lbs., and a few at $10.12½; throwouts at $5 @ $6; grassers and buttermilks at $3.50 @ $5; Western calves at $7. Dressed calves 10c @ 15c for city dressed veals; 9c @ 13½c for country dressed, and 7c @ 9c for dressed grassers and buttermilks.

Common to prime sheep sold at $3 @ $4.75 per 100 lbs.; culls at $2 @ $2.50; common to choice lambs at $6 @ $8.50; culls at $4.25 @ $5.50. Dressed mutton 7c @ 9½c, and dressed lambs at 9½c @ 13c, with a few hog dressed lambs at 13½c.

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